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ABSTRACT

The Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) has provided an alternative school program for students with long-term suspensions since the 1995-96 school year. Since 1996-97, the WCPSS has contracted with a private firm to operate the Richard M. Milburn High School (RMHS), as an alternative learning center. This Executive Summary highlights the major conclusions of collected evaluations of the alternative program over the years. After the first year of the program, voluntary enrollment has been at capacity, indicating that the program is filling a need. The basic skills of many students in this program are well below grade level. Although affective and behavioral interventions can be woven into the core curricula, the emphasis must be on academics. Communications with the regular schools have been shown to be of great importance, and evaluations have shown that students need assistance to make a successful return to the regular school. The RMHS program met four of five student outcome goals that were set for the 1997-98 year, with improvement conspicuous for the end-of-grade, end-of-course writing examinations. It is probable that two of the most important factors in the improvement were hiring a new principal and the improved stability in operations that came with the school's second year. (SLD)

Eye on Evaluation

Evaluation and Research Department

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E&R Report No. 00.01

Collected Evaluations on the WCPSS Alternative School Program for Students with Long-Term Suspensions

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Wake County Public Schools

Evaluation and Research Department

**COLLECTED EVALUATIONS ON THE WCPSS ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL
PROGRAM FOR STUDENTS WITH LONG-TERM SUSPENSIONS**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) has provided an alternative school program for students with long-term (LT) suspensions since the 1995-96 year. In 1995-96, the program was operated by the WCPSS and known as the Alternative Learning Center (ALC). Since the 1996-97 year, the WCPSS has contracted with the Richard M. Milburn High School (RMHS), a private firm, to operate the program. Over these years, the WCPSS has conducted a number of evaluations of the program. This Executive Summary highlights major conclusions of these collected evaluations, including the results of two evaluations described in this report.

Major Conclusions

- The opportunity for students with LT suspensions to attend an alternative school provides an important option for these students to continue their education. After the first year, voluntary enrollment in the program has been at capacity, indicating the program is fulfilling a need.
- Academic success must be the main emphasis at this form of alternative school, as basic academic skills are well below grade level for many students. While affective and/or behavioral interventions can be woven into the core curricula and teachers can develop helping relations with students, core curricular content must be emphasized lest students fail again when they return to regular school the next year.
- Communications between the alternative school and the regular schools are critically important to share information on students such as academic strengths/weaknesses, attendance, grades, suspensions, and plans for returning to the regular schools the next year. Breakdowns in communication happen due to a host of factors, and it will always be necessary for the alternative school and regular schools to find ways to improve communications.
- Students need assistance to make a successful return to the regular school. Despite the best efforts of the alternative school, many students experience recurring problems when they return to regular schools. The alternative school and regular schools both have responsibilities for planning and carrying out transitional support activities.
- The WCPSS should formalize expectations with RMHS for self-evaluation in future years.

Overview

This report is one in a series of four reports produced by the WCPSS Evaluation and Research (E&R) Department to address this particular form of WCPSS alternative school. As depicted in the figure below, the reports evaluate student outcomes in three different years and conduct follow-up studies with two different cohorts since the inception of the program in 1995-96.

Figure 1. Chronology and Content of Alternative School Reports

1995-96 ALC	1996-97 RMHS	1997-98 RMHS	1998-99 RMHS
An evaluation of ALC outcomes in the 1995-96 year. E&R Report No. 97.02	An evaluation of RMHS outcomes in the 1996-97 year. E&R Report No. 98.02	An evaluation of RMHS outcomes in the 1997-98 year. (This report)	
A follow-up study, evaluating outcomes for 1995-96 ALC participants in the 1996-97 year. E&R Report No. 98.09			
	A follow-up study, evaluating outcomes for 1996-97 RMHS participants in the 1997-98 year. (This report)		

The remainder of this report details the results of the last two evaluations depicted in the figure above. In Part I of this report, results of the follow-up evaluation conducted in the 1997-98 year are reported for students who attended the RMHS program in the 1996-97 year. In Part II of this report, results are reported for the evaluation of student outcome goals that were set for the RMHS program in the 1997-98 year.

Part I: RMHS 1996-97 Follow-Up Evaluation

Part I Introduction

The 1996-97 school year was RMHS's first year of operation in WCPSS. RMHS served 77 students with LT suspensions in the 1996-97 year and another 28 students who were school dropouts or deemed at risk of school failure. This analysis is a follow-up evaluation of educational outcomes for students with LT suspensions in the 1997-98 year. Three outcomes were investigated:

- 1) How many of the 77 students returned to WCPSS in the 1997-98 year;
- 2) What grades did returning students earn in the 1997-98 year; and
- 3) How many suspensions did returning students have in the 1997-98 year?

Also, comparisons are made to the follow-up evaluation that was conducted with LT-suspended students who participated in the Alternative Learning Centers in the 1995-96 year (E&R Report No. 98.09). Data from the earlier evaluation were reanalyzed for this report to permit a side-by-side comparison of findings.

Part I Results

Results in the two follow-up investigations are consistent, with similar findings in both evaluations as described in the following text.

- **Return Rate: Enrollment**

One finding of both reports is that participation in the alternative school program may have positively influenced students' decision to return to school the next year. In both years, alternative school participants returned to WCPSS at a substantially higher rate than did nonparticipants (Figure 2). One important caveat, however, is that RMHS participants may be different from nonparticipants in some unknown tendency to continue in an educational program.

Figure 2. Cross Tabulations for Referral and Enrollment at Alternative School by Return to WCPSS the Next Year

Returns to WCPSS the Next Year	LT Students Referred to Attend Alternative School			
	1995-96 ALC Year (n = 265*)		1996-97 RMHS Year (n = 161**)	
	Chose to enroll at ALC		Chose to enroll at RMHS	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Yes	82 78.8%	93 57.8%	55 76.4%	39 43.8%
No	22 21.2%	68 42.2%	17 23.6%	50 56.2%
Significance	Chi-square = 12.5215 df = 1 p < .001		Chi-square = 17.3758 df = 1 p < .0001	

* Not counting 5 students who graduated in the 1995-96 year.

** Not counting 6 students who graduated in the 1996-97 year.

- **Return Rate: Withdrawal**

One perspective on whether students who enrolled at an alternative school differed from those who did not enroll in terms of some tendency to continue in an educational program is to investigate how many of those who returned the next year from either group stayed to complete the year. Figure 3 shows that there was a significant difference in the 1995-96 group, with those who enrolled in the ALC alternative program staying to complete the next school year at a higher rate than those who did not enroll; however, this difference was not apparent for the RMHS students in the 1996-97 group.

This finding is ambiguous but provides some evidence that students who enrolled in either alternative program may have a greater proclivity to continue in their educational program.

Figure 3. Cross Tabulations for Returning Students Staying to Complete the School Year Following a LT Suspension the Year Before

Stays to Complete the Next Year	LT Students Returning to WCPSS the Next Year			
	1995-96 ALC Year (n = 175)		1996-97 RMHS Year (n = 94)	
	Chose to enroll at ALC		Chose to enroll at RMHS	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Yes	49 59.8%	40 43.0%	26 47.3%	20 51.3%
No	33 40.2%	53 57.0%	29 52.7%	19 48.7%
Significance	Chi-square = 4.8892 df = 1 p < .05		Chi-square = 0.1468 Df = 1 p = ns	

• Academic Performance

The final grades of students returning to WCPSS in the year following their LT suspension were investigated. Only students who stayed to complete the school year were analyzed. As depicted in Figure 4, the results show that the two groups--participants and nonparticipants--did not differ in their subsequent academic success. In the year of the ALC program and the year of the RMHS program, students who enrolled in these programs were no more successful in their academics the next year than were students who did not enroll.

One caveat to these results is that the 2x2 chi-square analysis shown in Figure 4 may not reveal subtle distinctions in academic accomplishment that might differ between the two groups of students.

Figure 4. Cross Tabulations for the Academic Performance of Students Who Return to School the Next Year and Complete the Year

Final Grades the Next Year	Final Grades for Returning Students Who Complete the Following School Year			
	1995-96 ALC Year (n = 86*)		1996-97 RMHS Year (n = 43**)	
	Chose to enroll at ALC		Chose to enroll at RMHS	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
0-49% Failure (Fs)	30 62.5%	28 73.7%	15 60.0%	11 61.1%
50-100% Failure (Fs)	18 37.5%	10 26.3%	10 40.0%	7 38.9%
Significance	Chi-square = 1.2082 df = 1 p = ns		Chi-square = 0.0054 Df = 1 p = ns	

* Not counting 3 students with missing data

** Not counting 3 students with missing data

• Behavioral Conduct

The number of short-term (ST) and LT suspensions of students returning to WCPSS in the year following their LT suspension was investigated. Again, only students who stayed to complete the year were analyzed. Regardless of whether students participated in the alternative program or not, in both years the percentage of students receiving either one or more ST suspensions and/or a LT suspension ranged between 59% to 75%. It is evident that many returning students continue to have behavioral difficulties.

Some of the returning students who received LT suspensions in the year of their return, but stayed to "complete the year", were evidently re-enrolled in another alternative program; however, data maintained on the student database are not clear for a number of cases.

Figure 5. Cross Tabulations for the Behavioral Conduct of Students Who Return to School the Next Year and Complete the Year

ST + LT Suspensions the Next Year	ST + LT Suspensions for Returning Students Who Complete the Following School Year			
	1995-96 ALC Year (n = 89)		1996-97 RMHS Year (n = 46)	
	Chose to enroll at ALC		Chose to enroll at RMHS	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
None	20 40.8%	15 37.5%	10 38.5%	5 25.0%
1 or more	29* 59.2%	25** 62.5%	16*** 61.5%	15**** 75.0%
Significance	Chi-square = 0.1015 df = 1 p = ns		Chi-square = 0.9322 df = 1 p = ns	

* 5 students had LT suspensions

** 2 students had LT suspensions

*** 1 student had a LT suspension

**** 2 students had LT suspensions

Part I Conclusions

This and the previous follow-up evaluation essentially found the same results, regardless of whether the program was operated by the WCPSS or privately operated by RMHS. Either program certainly provides a continuing educational experience for those who participate in the year of their LT suspension, and may make a positive contribution to students' decision to continue in school the next year. However, it has not been shown that a program for LT-suspended students makes a significant difference in the performance of students the next year when they return to regular schools. Students who participate in the program have about the same level of academic and behavioral difficulties the next year as do those who do not participate in the program.

Part II: RMHS 1997-98 Evaluation of Student Outcomes

Part II Introduction

Following the first year of operation in 1996-97, WCPSS renewed the contract with RMHS to operate in the 1997-98 year. The new contract called for a minimum of 130 students, and limited participation at RMHS to LT suspended students.

Over the summer of 1997, RMHS hired a new headmaster (Elvia Walker, a former WCPSS principal) and a number of new staff members. The school remained at the same facility and opened its doors on August 11, 1997. The first student enrolled on August 18, 1997. A total of 140 students enrolled by the end of the year. Notable changes in student demographic characteristics at RMHS between the 1996-97 and 1997-98 years are compared in the table to the right:

- a greater number of students enrolled in the 1997-98 year;
- a higher percentage of female students enrolled in the 1997-98 year;
- a higher percentage of Black students enrolled in the 1997-98 year;
- a higher percentage of middle school students enrolled in the 1997-98 year; and
- Garner HS made more referrals and Millbrook HS made fewer referrals in the 1997-98 year.

1996-97	RMHS Student Characteristics	1997-98
105	Enrollment	140
	Gender	
17 (16.2%)	F	46 (32.9%)
88 (83.8%)	M	94 (67.1%)
	Race	
60 (57.1%)	Black	95 (67.9%)
42 (40.0%)	White	40 (28.6%)
3 (2.9%)	Other	5 (3.6%)
	Grade	
4 (3.8%)	6	9 (6.4%)
2 (1.9%)	7	17 (12.1%)
19 (18.1%)	8	20 (14.3%)
47 (44.8%)	9	54 (38.6%)
17 (16.2%)	10	21 (15.0%)
10 (9.5%)	11	10 (7.1%)
6 (5.7%)	12	9 (6.4%)
	Top Four Referring Schools	
Millbrook HS (23)	1st	Garner HS (25)
East Wake HS (15)	2nd	Broughton HS (9)
Garner HS (11)	3rd	East Wake HS (9)
Sanderson HS (6)	4th	Enloe HS (9)

Part II Results

Following an evaluation of the program in the first year (E&R Report No. 98.02), objectives for the second year were revised and five student outcome goals were established. Results obtained on these five outcome goals are reported below.

Outcome 1: RMHS students will achieve 80% attendance. *RMHS successfully achieved this outcome with 85.5% average daily attendance.*

Per procedures established for RMHS operations, RMHS reported student attendance data throughout the year to each student's regular school where the data were to be entered into the Student Information Management System (SIMS). Both RMHS staff members and SIMS technicians at the regular schools described a variety of problems with this process, most of which can be grouped in one of three categories: standardized procedures, communication procedures, and data handling procedures. A qualitative analysis of their comments is reported in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6. Communication Problems between RMHS and SIMS Technicians

Issue	Problem Concerns
Standardized Procedures	• Principals and SIMS technicians need to be fully appraised of their responsibility to record RMHS alternative school data. • A single format for reporting information should be standardized for all schools.
Communication Procedures	• Attendance data should be communicated at regular intervals. • A consistent method of communicating attendance data to regular schools should be adopted (i.e., hard copy sent to SIMS technician with copy for principal).
Data Handling Procedures	• Attendance data should be organized in an easy-to-read format (i.e., spreadsheet). • A consistent set of codes should be used to designate specific events (i.e., initial enrollment, excused and unexcused absence, suspension, withdrawal). • Errors should be minimized (i.e., student ID numbers and regular schools were sometimes incorrect, attendance was sometimes noted for weekend dates)

Because SIMS attendance data were not consistently available for the RMHS students, RMHS provided the E&R Department with attendance figures from their own records for the 1997-98 year. Average daily attendance was calculated by summing across all students the total days in attendance and the total days in membership, and dividing the former by the latter. Days not counted as being in attendance were absences (excused and unexcused) and suspensions. Average daily attendance at RMHS in the 1997-98 year (85.5%) was slightly greater than in the 1996-97 year (84.1%).

Outcome 2: The rate at which RMHS students achieve Level III or IV on the EOG/EOC exams and 2.5 or greater on the Writing tests will improve by at least 50% relative to the rate RMHS demonstrated in 1996-97. *RMHS successfully achieved this outcome with results on 38% (55/143) of the EOG, EOC, and Writing exams administered at or above competency standards.*

RMHS surpassed the 50% criterion for this outcome goal--achieving better than 100% improvement on the End-of-Grade (EOG), End-of-Course (EOC), and 7th/10th grade writing exams. RMHS made this improvement with more students taking more exams relative to the 1996/97 year. In 1997/98, there were 78 students taking 143 exams while, in 1996/97, there were 43 students taking 89 exams. Results on these exams for LT-suspended students are reported in Figure 7 for these two years. The RMHS program showed noticeable improvement in the 1997-98 year in the following areas: EOG Reading, EOG Math, EOC English I, and EOC ELP. Areas where the RMHS program did not make significant improvement include EOC U.S. History and 10th grade Writing.

Figure 7. Comparing RMHS Students' Competency on EOG, EOC, and Writing Exams for Two Years*

Subject	Middle School End-of-Grade			High School End-of-Course						Totals
	Rdng	Math	7 th grd Wrtg	Engl I	ELP	Blgy	U.S. Hstry	Algl	10 th grd Writing	
Comptncy Criterion	Level III/IV	Level III/IV	Score ≥ 2.5	Level III/IV	Level III/IV	Level III/IV	Level III/IV	Level III/IV	Score ≥ 2.5	
1996/97 Exams Passed/ Taken	4/16	5/16	0/11	2/7	0/11	3/9	0/5	1/5	1/9	16/89 (18%)
1997/98 Exams Passed/ Taken	12/26	15/27	2/5	9/21	10/20	4/11	0/10	3/11	0/12	55/143 (38%)

Notes: * Abbreviations are as follow: Reading (Rdng); Writing (Wrtg); English (Eng); Economics, Law, & Politics (ELP); Biology (Blgy); History (Hstry); Algebra (Alg); grade (grd); and Competency (Comptncy).

Outcome 3: RMHS students will obtain an overall growth in grade point average of at least 0.5 points on average. *RMHS just barely missed achieving this outcome; however, a lack of data on the mainframe database suggests caution in interpreting this finding.*

Data analysis for this outcome was conducted on:

- students who completed the 1997-98 year at RMHS, and
- who had final grade point averages (GPA) posted on the WCPSS mainframe database for the 1996-97 and 1997-98 years.

Of the 140 students enrolled at RMHS in the 1997-98 year, one student was dropped from this analysis due to having no enrollment history in the WCPSS prior to the 1997-98 year. Of the remaining 139 names submitted to the WCPSS Information Systems, final GPAs were available on the mainframe for only 13 students who met the two conditions above. Difference scores for the GPAs of these students (1997-98 final GPA minus 1996-97 final GPA) ranged between -0.91 to +1.87. A negative difference score indicates a student's GPA was worse in the second year compared to the first, and a positive difference score indicates the GPA was better in the second year. Difference scores were negative ('worse') for four students and positive ('better') for nine students. The sum of the difference scores for all 13 students was 5.96 and the average of the 13 difference scores was 0.46, indicating RMHS failed to meet the criterion established for Outcome #3...but not by much.

The analysis of this outcome must be interpreted very cautiously for a variety of reasons. One reason for caution is that there was so much missing data. Also, there can be considerable variance in the assignment of grades between teachers at the same school and/or different schools. Another reason for caution is that the amount of time a student was enrolled at RMHS in a given course earning credit varied due to entering the school at different times of the year. A fourth reason for caution is that GPA data are not well documented on the mainframe.

Outcome 4: At least 50% of 16 year-olds eligible to participate in the Transition-To-Work Program (TWP) will participate and satisfactorily complete the program. *RMHS successfully achieved this outcome, with over 50% of eligible students participating in TWP; employers had positive comments about the students as well as the TWP.*

RMHS indicated there were 37 (24.1%) students among the 140 enrolled at RMHS who were eligible to participate in the TWP during the 1997-98 year. Of these 37 students, 13 (86.7%) of 15 earned one unit of credit for completing the classroom portion of the TWP elective. Most of these students were second semester enrollees who could not complete enough hours of employment to satisfy the work experience portion of the TWP elective. Of the remaining 22 students enrolled in the TWP, 16 (72.7%) completed both the classroom and work portions for two units of credit. Among the total 37 students eligible to participate in the TWP, 29 (78.4%) satisfactorily met the classroom and/or classroom with work experience requirement.

RMHS provided the names of the businesses, phone numbers, and employer contacts for 17 of the 22 students engaged in the TWP work experience. In July 1998, the E&R Department was able to conduct telephone interviews with the employer contact (or someone who knew the student) for 14 of these students.

- Eight of the employers interviewed knew about the TWP. These eight individuals indicated the TWP coordinator at RMHS had contacted them by telephone and/or visited the business. Five employers were new to their position and did not know about the TWP, and one employer indicated that the student had secured his job on his own rather than through the TWP.
- The eight employers who had contact with RMHS generally had favorable comments to say:
 - ⇒ about the student (e.g., "Wonderful worker", "Very impressed with student", "I was pleased with the student and his efforts", "The student has come a long way", "Student is a very hard worker");
 - ⇒ about the TWP ("Wonderful program", "Commend program coordinator", "Would like to have another student", "Commend program coordinator and team for efforts", "TWP is an excellent program...kids are given a chance to redeem themselves").
- Seven of the eight employers positively rated the TWP on a scale of 1-to-5 (poor to excellent) with six 5s and one 4; one employer negatively rated the program with a 2.
- The eight employers all indicated that students averaged at least 10 hours of work per week, with three students averaging 20-30 hours per week.

Outcome 5: RMHS students will have a current academic and behavioral plan, updated within the last month of their enrollment at RMHS. *RMHS minimally met this objective with brief descriptions of student needs being written for most students enrolled for a month or more.*

In the original proposal to operate an alternative school, RMHS indicated that "Every student will have a Personalized Educational Plan (PEP) developed upon entrance to the school by the RMHS faculty. The student and parent or guardian will participate in the plan development. The PEP will serve as a contract regarding expected behavioral and academic performance" One finding of the RMHS evaluation for 1996-97 (E&R Report No. 98.02) was that there was no evidence that PEPs were implemented that year, and a recommendation in that report was that "RMHS needs to implement a method of monitoring and documenting students' instructional and behavioral strategies throughout the year for every student."

In the 1997-98 year, the guidance counselor at RMHS met with students individually and in small groups throughout the year, and wrote descriptions of student needs for 116 of the 140 students who enrolled at RMHS. Of the remaining 24 students, 5 students were enrolled for less than one month, and it would be unrealistic to expect a PEP to be developed for students at the school for such a short period; however, there were 19 students enrolled for periods of 1 to 7 months who were lacking any narrative descriptions.

The descriptions for the 116 students were brief, averaging four to five lines of text per student. The descriptions typically incorporated some factual information pertaining to reasons why the student was at RMHS, some information on psycho-social characteristics of the student, and some information on appropriate counseling interventions (Reality Therapy was most often indicated). There was very little information on academic strategies other than occasional comments about students' interest in particular subjects, having a special education classification, and/or plans to graduate and attend post-secondary education. None of the descriptions were dated, and there is no evidence that descriptions were updated or revised over time.

Part II Conclusions

The RMHS program met 4 of the 5 student outcome goals that were set for the school in the 1997-98 year. It is especially notable that RMHS exceeded the goal for performance on the EOG/EOC/Writing exams by a factor of two--whereas the goal was for a 50% improvement relative to the 1996-97 year, RMHS achieved greater than 100% improvement. RMHS' success on these goals may be explained by a variety of factors, but it is probable that two of the most important factors were the hiring of an experienced principal as headmaster and an improved stability in operations that a second year brings.